DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 473 CS 506 595

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TITLE Kenneth Burke's Thirties: The 1935 Writers Congress.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association (Louisville, KY, April 6-8, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Discourse Analysis; *Persuasive Discourse; *Propaganda; Rhetorical Criticism
IDENTIFIERS 1930s; *Burke (Kenneth); Communist Party; Rhetorical Strategies; Rhetorical Theory

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Kenneth Burke's speech ("Revolutionary Symbolism") to the 1935 Writers Congress, a congress intended to explore the relationship between politics and art, and controlled closely by the American Communist Party. The essay maintains that Burke was prepared to offer to the Communist Party and to all "left-leaning" writers a propaganda strategy, based on what he saw as the potential for cultural transvaluations through politically astute manipulations of artistic form. The essay analyzes Burke's propaganda strategy as an extension--and transformation--of the concept of "form." It also uses the concept as the basis for constructing an account of Burke's reception by the Congress, and ultimately suggests that Burke's speech signals a reconceptualization by Burke of the art of "rhetoric" itself, moving from a primary conceptualization of rhetoric as technique to a primary conceptualization of rhetoric as propaganda (which is itself preliminary to the move toward rhetoric as identification). The paper is in three sections: (1) a historical description of the purposes and nature of the Congress; (2) an exposition of Burke's strategy for revolutionary propaganda; and (3) an assessment of Burke's own strategy in speaking before the Congress and his reception by them in relation to the concepts of "form" and "rhetoric." Twenty-two references are attached. (SR)

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KENNETH BURKE'S THIRTIES:

The 1935 Writers Congress

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Paper Presented at the Southern States
Communication Association Annual Meeting,
Louisville, KY. April 1989

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"The 1930s are becoming the great unknown era in American history. The public wants to forget them, the politicians distort them and they have not yet been re-created by novelists or historians; yet we cannot form a true picture of the present while trying to abolish the recent past."

Malcolm Cowley, 1951

The First American Writers Congress, controlled closely by the American Communist Party, opened on Friday evening, April 26, 1935, in the Mecca Temple in uptown New York City, with a carefully orchestrated public session. A crowd of "more than 4,000 people" had paid between thirty-five cents and one dollar and ten cents each to attend the session. They filled "Mecca Temple to the roof" and "formed strands at the sides and rear of the auditorium." The two-hundred-and sixteen writer-congressmen were seated in folding chairs on the main stage facing the audience. For the next two days, the Congress would convene at The New School for Social Research, and the sessions would be "attended only by invited delegates, guests, and representatives of the press" (Rosenberg, 223-4), and the crowds would dwindle to about four hundred (Josephson, 1967, 366). But for now, the "writer-congressmen" and the public audience convened for the purpose of listening to speeches by Granville Hicks, Malcolm Cowley, Langston Hughes, Michael Gold, Waldo Frank, playwright Friedrich Wolf, exiled from Hitler's Germany, Hayes Jones, representative of a seaman's union, and Earl Browder, secretary of the American Communist Party.

As Malcolm Cowley recalls, Browder's speech was the one to which the writers and audience attended most carefully, for "he was laying down the party line." Browder's "message was factual and conciliatory." He addressed the fears of the writers, a majority of whom were not at that time affiliated with the Communist Party, that "the Communists might tell them what to write and treat them as artists in uniform" (Cowley, 1980, 273). Browder declared, "The first demand of the party upon its writer-members is that they shall be good writers, constantly better writers, for only so can they really serve the party. We do not want to take good writers and make bad strike leaders of them" (as quoted in Cowley, 1980, 274). In taking such a conciliatory and non-ideologically dogmatic stance, Browder was signalling, perhaps unintentionally, an impending change in Party policy, but he was also, perhaps more consciously, arguing -- as Jerre Mangione wrote of his own "cumulative impression" of the entire Congress -- that although "writers might differ on the distinctions between literature and propaganda, the old slogan of the John Reed clubs -- 'Art is a class weapon'--was still good enough for the party leadership" (125).

Browder's keynote, reflecting the tensions between art and propaganda, defined the central issue for the Congress at large,

but also presaged specifically the issues confronted by Kenneth Burke in his speech to the Congress, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America." Burke had for many years in his own theorizing struggled with the relationship between aesthetics and politics as that relationship manifests itself in the concept of "form," and at the Congress he was prepared to offer to the Communist Party and to all "left-leaning" writers a propaganda strategy, based on what he saw as the potential for cultural transvaluations through politically astute manipulations of artistic form. This essay analyzes Burke's propaganda strategy as an extension -- and transformation -- of the concept of "form." It also uses the concept as the basis for constructing an account of Burke's reception by the Congress. It is ultimately suggested that Burke's speech signals a reconceptualizion by Burke of the art of "rhetoric" itself, moving from a primary conceptualization of rhetoric as technique to a primary conceptualization of rhetoric as propaganda (which is itself preliminary to the move toward rhetoric as identification). My argument is developed in three segments: an historical description of the purposes and nature of the Congress, an exposition of Burke's strategy for revolutionary propaganda, and an assessment of Burke's own strategy in speaking before the Congress and his reception by them in relation to the concepts of "form" and "rhetoric."

From the John Reed Clubs to the League of American Writers: The Context of the 1935 American Writers Congress

The Writers Congress was convened on the cusp of the movement from the so-called "Third Period of Communism" toward the "Popular Front Period." The early years of international Communism, from 1917-1921, constitute the First Period, a time of "romantic dreams about carrying the revolution to the rest of the globe." The Second Period, from 1921-1928, reflected a "state of truce with the capitalistic world" in which the Communists attempted to make inroads by "boring from within." In 1928, the Party line changed to a more militant and confrontational tactic, one which saw "anyone, radical or conservative, who opposed the general line of the party" as "a class enemy fighting on the other side of the barricades" (Cowley, 1980, 238).[1] The party line, as determined in Moscow and articulated by more local leaders, was sacroscant, and loyalty to it defined the "true" Marxist revolutionary: all others were, in reality, fascist charlatans, or, more specifically, "Social Fascists" (Gilbert, 104). The Comintern, at its Eleventh Plenum, made this dichotomy explicit in its analysis that the economic crisis presented workers "with the decisive alternatives; either dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or -- to put an end to capitalistic exploitation and oppression" (as quoted in Klehr, 11).

The hardline of the Third Period affected the Communists' relationship with the community of American writers.

Essentially, the Party courted the youngest of American writers, those just coming of age in the early 1930s, offering them support through the John Reed Clubs, Pen and Hammer Groups, or other similar associations. The John Reed Club organization was founded in 1929, with chapters in many major American cities including Boston, Chicago (which counted young Richard Wright among its membership), and New York City, where it was large enough to be divided into sections. The clubs were named after the author of Ten Days that Shook the World, an American eyewitness account of the Bolshevik revolution, who also helped to create the American Communist Party. Reed returned to Russia, where he contracted typhus and died. His ashes remain as the only American ashes perserved in the Kremlin. He became, in short, "America's first martyr for Communism" (Robbins, 322). Although, particularly in New York, "some established writers" worked with the Clubs, they usually were not members. Thus, while Joshua Kunitz, Horace Gregory, Edward Dahlberg, and Kenneth Burke were listed as "lecturers" for the John Reed Club Writers' School in New York City, most of the Club members were at best neophytes. Indeed, "a unique characteristic of the organization was that most of the artists and writers who belonged were unknown." It was primarily these "cadres" of young, eager writers that spawned the generation of proletarian novels with which the thirties is often associated. The John Reed Clubs were "the foundation on which the proletarian movement was to be built" (Gilbert, 107-108).[2] Their social vision, their doctrine, was called "Prolecult," "which is the telescoped Russian term for proletarian culture" (Cowley, 1980, 146). These proletarian writers were dedicated to the cause of revolution, and they embraced fully the slogan that "Art is a class weapon." Speaking on behalf of proletarian writers, Joshua Kunitz declared in The New Masses (1934): "Yes we are artists in uniform. We are Leninists, Communists, Bolsheviks" (as quoted in Klehr, 351).

More established writers, critics, and intellectuals were also courted by the Communist Party at the outset of the 1930s: they were desired primarily for the prestige and recognition which they could convey to the Party and its political program. Luminaries such as Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Theodore Dreiser, Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, Sidney Hook, Sherwood Anderson, Granville Hicks, John Dos Passos, and, of course, Kenneth Burke were wooed toward identification with Party ideology if not actual membership (Klehr, 79). The Party's "greatest triumph among intellectuals in this era came during the 1932 Presidential election campaign," when many writers, composers, and artists banded together to form the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, the Communist Party ticket (Klehr, 80). Fifty-three well known intellectuals publicly affiliated themselves with the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford (Cowley, 1980, 112), although only "four to six" of them were Party members (Klehr, 81). After the election, the association was transformed into the "League of Professional Groups," whose purpose was "to propagandiz[e] and

activize the professions, to engage in communist activity on the cultural front, to provide technical aid to the Communist Party and its mass organizations" (as quoted in Klehr, 82).

Despite the Party's enthusiasm with the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, they were still distrustful of the older writers, and they were wary of the newly formed League of Professional Groups. The Party viewed the older writers "as a bohemian and wholly undependable element," who while occasionally useful could not be counted on to support the Party line. As Sherwood Anderson put it, upon "hearing that Dreiser was accused of being a Communist, 'He isn't, any more than I am. He couldn't be if he wanted to. They wouldn't have him'" (Cowley, 1980, 117). Such skepticism on the part of the Party seems to have been warranted, for the new League of Professional Groups, responding to Hitler's ascension to power, soon wanted to embrace with liberals -- and even Trotskyists and Lovestoneites -- in united opposition against the fascists. Such desires flew in the face of Party dogma, which at that time viewed Hitler's take-over as an acceleration of the inevitable class-war, and proletarian victory, in Germany (Cowley, "Thirty Years Later," 497). Thus, "a victim of the Party's need to control with an iron fist any organization associated with it," the League of Professional Groups "faded into oblivion" during the tumultuous summer of 1933 (Klehr, 83).

The heightening of the economic crisis in 1933, marked by the failure of many banks and the temporary closings of all others, combined with the rise of fascism in Germany and its elevation around the globe to radicalize further many American writers. Cowley, for instance, recalls that Robert Cantwell, his co-worker at the New Republic, was elated over the March 4, 1933, "holiday" for all banks in America, declaring to Cowley that the date "would be celebrated in future years as the last day of capitalism all over the world" (1980, 166). Writers tended to remain in sympathy with the radical goal of revolution, and they therefore also tended to be outspokenly anti-capitalist, but they were by-and-large reluctant to accept Party discipline or to spout the Party line uncritically. The simple "truth" of the matter, according to Bogardus and Holeson, is that "the best writers and most thoughtful critics refused to follow the party line" (6). In consequence, many writers -- at one time fellow-travelers with the Communists -- were now perceived as standing on the "other side of the barricades," as being Trotskyites, or Socialists, or, eventually, Social Fascists. With the "dissolution" of the League of Professional Groups came "the Communists' declaration of war with fellow travelers," including wayward former League members such as Sidney Hook (Klehr, 83).

Communist critics, many of them the young proletarians of the John Reed Clubs, led the charge in the literary field, with Granville Hicks, now editor of The New Masses, setting the

pace. Hicks, a Party member for the latter portion of the 1930s, espoused the Party line; he reminded Matthew Josephson of "an implacable Robespierre judging his erring brother citizens in the name of the Goddess Reason." He "operated a sort of ideological guillotine to sever the heads of unworthy authors." Hicks' position, according to Josephson, was that to "be a good writer a man must first become a proper communist." The writer "who looked at life from the point of view of the exploiting class inevitably distorted life; only the partisan of the proletarians was capable of true and clarifying interpretations." "In short," concludes Josephson, "Hicks, who was sometimes called the 'literary terrorist of the left,' was more intolerant of heresy than the most sectarian expounder of the party line" (1967, 359-60).

After 1932, then, as the Comintern preached the lines of the Third Period, many American communists and fellow-travelers in the writing community rallied around the John Reed Clubs and their publications (such as Left Front, the Cauldron, the Anvil, Partisan Review, and Partisan) and begin producing revolutionary art featuring proletarian themes while other, mainly older, sympathizers drifted, unable to commit to Party univocality, but ideologically aligned with its general purposes. Those in the latter category, as has been seen, were occasionally castigated by the "ideologically pure" as being "petty bourgeoisie" and incipient "social fascists;" on other occasions, however, even the Party affiliates were willing to claim such sympathetic drifters as allies.

Kenneth Burke is a prime example of one who, even in the early 1930s, was occasionally castigated (as he was by Granville Hicks over Counter-Statement) and occasionally viewed as an ally, as when he was a lecturer at the John Reed Writers' School. Joshua Kunitz's treatment of Burke illustrates this further. In 1931, echoing Hicks, Kunitz blasted Counter-Statement, castigating Burke's "spitefulness," especially in the "Program" essay, which he viewed as "essentially an innocuous and petty nihilism" (as quoted in Aaron, 289). Yet in 1934 Kunitz, by then also a lecturer at the John Reed Writers' School, published a list of thirty-six prominent writers who were grouped "around the John Reed Clubs, the New Masses and other organizations supporting the Communist Party." Kenneth Burke, along with other occasionally wayward fellow-travelers such as Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, and James Farrell were on the list (Klehr, 84). Perhaps Daniel Aaron best summed-up the Communist Party's perception of Burke: he was "a controversial figure . . ., welcomed during this period as an influential ally, yet distrusted because of his ideologically dangerous fondness for paradox" (287).

In September 1934, the Communist Party in America marked a change of direction in its relation with writers, a change which in some respects presaged the end of the Third Period. At a meeting of the national John Reed Club organization in Chicago,

Alexander Trachtenberg, a "revolutionary of long ago from czarist Russia," (Josephson, 1967, 364) in his capacity as head of the communist "International Press" and as "the cultural head of the Communist party in this country at that time" (Hicks, "Thirty Years Later," 500) presided over the meeting. Trachtenberg argued that American communists should follow the lead of their European counter-parts and sponsor a "congress of American writers of various shades of liberal and anti-fascist opinion" (Josephson, 1967, 364). Under Trachtenberg's influence, the forty-odd delegates decided unanimously to issue a Call for a National Writers Congress, to be held, symbolically, on May 1, 1935 (In actuality, of course, it convened on April 26).[3] What was not clear during Trachtenberg's speech became clear that night at a party caucus in a Chicago hotel: the John Reed Clubs "would be dissolved" and replaced by a League of American Writers, composed of proven and successful authors (Aaron, 282).

The Call for a National Writers Congress was issued promptly, ironically under the auspices of the New York John Reed Club; it was published first in The New Masses (January 1935) and subsequently in Partisan Review (February 1935). The National Writers Congress was designed by the Party to fulfill two functions: 1) to broaden the scope of those writers it would count as fellow-travelers in order to build a more effective anti-fascist propaganda, and 2) to create the League of American Writers to replace the John Reed Clubs nationwide. Despite these objectives, and their effect of alienating many of the younger, proletarian writers (only an estimated 50% of those who were members of the New York John Reed Club, which ostensibly sponsored the Congress, were even invited to the Writers Congress) (Gilbert 135), the American Writers Congress was without question planned and dominated by the Communist party itself (Klehr, 351-52; Cowley and Hicks, "Thirty Years Later," 497), and it was not yet a party firmly committed to a Popular Front.

Given the Communist domination of the Congress along side this reading of its objectives, its location at the cusp of the transition between the Third Period and the Popular Front becomes evident. Although in retrospect Cowley, among others, maintains that the "very notion of holding a writers' congress, with a fairly broad composition," showed that "the sectarianism of the Third Period was going out of fashion," (1980, 270) at the time alternative understandings no doubt seemed at least as plausible. That is, while it is undoubtedly the case that moments of transition are more clear in retrospect, and while it is arguably the case, as Harvey Klehr has suggested, that "retrospective efforts to link the congress to the emerging Popular front . . . severely underestimate the Party's domination of the event" (473),[4] it seems to be objectively the case that the Congress reflected strongly both the party line of the Third Period and the still nascent Popular Front. I say "objectively" the case, because that ambivalence seems encased in the very language of the Call itself.

The wording of the Call reflected an ambiguity of mission, using on some occasions the zealous language of the Third Period and at times the more open and accommodating language of the Popular Front. The Call spoke of "proletarian revolution," "the destruction of capitalism," or "a workers' government" but at other times the "emphasis is no longer on revolution, but rather on a defense of culture" from Fascist destruction (Cowley, 1980, 270). The Call thus declared the purpose of the Congress to be "the exposition of all phases of a writer's participation in the struggle against war, the preservation of civil liberties, and the destruction of fascist tendencies everywhere" (as quoted in Rosenberg, 222). The comingling of coalition-building terms with the sharped-edged terms reflective of an "ideological guillotine" created a discordant text, but it did not necessarily portend a movement by the Party from the latter to the former.

That is, although to some the Congress may seem in retrospect to have been a harbinger of the Popular Front, it might also be understood as a continuation of the tactics of the "united front," wherein Communists sought to "secure participation of non-Communists in their own strikes and political activities." Under the united front, sympathetic allies would "unite with" the Party in specific activities, but the uniting was on Party terms and for Party objectives. The emerging Popular Front, however, would mean "a dilution of the aims of the Communists for the sake of obtaining participation by other groups -- often on the others' terms" (Gilbert, 140). The Writers Congress, with its oddly expansive yet ideologically aggressive Call, could be understood from either perspective.

One important indication of both the domination of the party and the recalcitrance of the Third Period was that while the Call specifically targeted "all writers who have achieved some standing in their respective fields; who have clearly indicated their sympathy to the revolutionary cause; who do not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, of the inevitability of revolution," it also overtly and deliberately excluded not only the neophyte if sympathetic proletarian writers but also the prominent leftist writers who were not in good standing. The next sentence reads: "Subsequently, we will seek to influence and win to our side those writers not yet so convinced" (as quoted in Cowley, 1980, 270-71). Cowley describes what occurred while the Call was being drafted:

> One question that continued to be argued was about the writers who should attend the congress. Should invitations be confined to those "who have clearly indicated their sympathy to the revolutionary cause," or should they also be extended to doubters and waverers? "On the other hand," Trachty [Trachtenberg] said, "the time has come to count noses." What he

> meant, I suppose, is that the congress should apply political standards, as during the Third Period. Waverers might be invited -- that was something new -- but not declared enemies of the party leadership such as Max Eastman, Sidney Hook, or V.F. Calverton (1980, 272).

As for the aging socialists who held some prominence politically prior to the World War, "they weren't considered at all" (Hicks, "Thirty Years Later," 498). Thus, while in some respects the September 1934 meeting of the national John Reed Clubs organization in Chicago suggested that "the party was about to shift its attitude toward intellectuals," exactly what the party was up to remained hazy even with the issuance of the Call (Gilbert, 134).

When Earl Browder spoke to the two distinct immediate audiences at the Mecca Temple -- the two-hundred plus writer-congressmen, a majority of whom were not Communists, and the "public" audience of more than four thousand, a vast majority of whom may actually have been Communists[5] -- he was articulating the party line, which had of late seemed to lean different ways at different times. Browder's conciliatory tone, reaching out to non-Communist writers even while not surrendering the party's "policy of placing ideological considerations ahead of literary quality" (Mangione, 125), signalled a transition from the overt politicization of the John Reed Clubs (which often did put writers "in uniforms" and make "bad strike leaders out of good writers") to the less sectarian League of American Writers. Whether it also signalled a movement away from the strictures of the Third Period itself remained to be seen. It was no wonder that, as Cowley reported, the writers were so anxious to hear what Browder had to say, since his anticipated clarifications could separate the "true revolutionaries" from the "incipient fascists." The speech, however, provided no definitive answers. Perhaps the remainder of the Congress would.

Kenneth Burke's Speech to the 1935 American Writers Congress

Let us arise like music --
Many instruments,
Singing in different voices,
Varied designs and timbres,
Disparate rhythms,
One single symphony.
Let us be like one chord set vibrant,
To which others are also set vibrant.

No less can save us.
No less than the blaze of glory,
Our vast uniting.

--Kenneth Burke
"Plea of the People," 1933

On March 12, 1935, Kenneth Burke was invited by Orrick Johns, poet, Secretary of the Organization Committee for the American Writers Congress and a Communist Party member since 1932 (Klehr, 351), to attend "a 'pre-congress' meeting" on March 18th "to work out the subjects of the reports to be given at the Writers Congress and select the persons who will deliver these reports." Johns exhorts Burke that it "is of utmost important" for him to attend the meeting. In a subsequent letter dated March 23, 1935, Kenneth Burke was invited by Orrick Johns to make a twenty-minute "literary report" to the Congress. The letter opens: "The organization committee strongly urges you to read a paper at the Writers Congress and suggests the following topic: Revolutionary Symbolism." That Burke's topic was either assigned to him or developed collaboratively at the "pre-congress" meeting is of significance in interpreting his speech, for failure to recognize the nature of his assignment may lead critics to over-emphasize the oxymoronic quality of the phrase "revolutionary symbolism" in assessing both the response to and importance of Burke's remarks. Frank Lentricchia, for instance, writes, "In those years of Marxist history. . ., Burke's speech had the discomforting feel of ideological deviance. Revolutionary **symbolism**? That is to confuse mere superstructural effect with the directive forces at the base, the economic motor principle of revolution" (282). The more telling aspect of Burke's title might well be in his addition of the prepositional phrase "in America." As Lentricchia does go on to note, this might well have been interpreted as putting on "the blinders of nationalism which will prevent us from seeing the real world historical dimension of revolution" (282). In any event, upon receiving his assignment from Johns, Burke immediately set to work drafting his essay: the notes for and a preliminary outline of a first draft of "Revolutionary Symbolism" are scrawled in the margins and on the back of Johns' March 23rd letter.

Burke received at least one more communication from Johns prior to the Congress. An April 9th letter informs Burke that on April 12th there will be a meeting of "all authors who will read reports at the Writers Congress." In what appears to be a form letter, with the personalized salutation in slightly different type, Johns instructs the authors: "If you have not yet comppeted [sic] the outline for your report, we hope you will do so and send it to the organization committee before the above date." The purpose of the meeting was for discussion of the outlines "in order to avoid overlapping of the reports, etc."

This series of meetings and consultations about the "reports" seems to confirm the fact that Burke's speech developed with aforeknowledge by the Organization Committee of both its topic and its arguments. In 1966, Burke seems to suggest as much, however obliquely, in a retrospective symposium with Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and others:

> When I wrote my piece for the Congress, I didn't know how things stood. I had a friend whom I took to be a member of the party (I didn't know, but I assumed that he was). I showed him the article before I read it at the Congress. I asked him to tell me what he thought of it, for I didn't want to do anything that in any way would be considered wrong. . . . My friend looked at it, and told me that he didn't see anything wrong with it. So I felt re-assured ("Thirty Years Later," 506).[6]

It was, then, with some degree of confidence that his message would be well-received that Burke addressed the writer-delegates on Saturday, April 27, at the New School for Social Research.

Burke's speech can, of course, be analyzed on several different levels. In what follows, I propose to examine the discourse from four different angles: 1) as a blueprint for a new strategy for revolutionary propaganda; 2) as an elaboration of, and modification in, Burke's concept of "form," which in turn leads Burke toward a re-conceptualization of "rhetoric" itself, a re-conceptualization which shifts the emphasis from technique to persuasion; 3) as itself a piece of strategic discourse presented to a specific audience at a specific time for a specific purpose; and 4) as an attempt by Burke to find unity in, or identification with, a collective, to transcend himself through unification and thus to transcend fears and isolations of a purely personal sort.

"Revolutionary Symbolism in America": A Propaganda Strategy for Communism

"Revolutionary Symbolism" begins with an argument that separates the material realm of necessity -- "food, tools, shelter, productive technique" -- from the symbolic realm of attitudes and abstractions, which allows for the sorts of

"attachment" and "cooperation" that create "the communal relationships by which a group is bound." In this speech, Burke refers to symbolic constructs which bind a group together as "myths," and each myth must offer a "unifying principle" about which people's "attachments as a group are polarized." Just as the material necessities are indispensable for a society, so too are myths: "'Myths' may be wrong, or they may be used to bad ends -- but they cannot be dispensed with. In the last analysis, they are our basic psychological tools for working together" (87). Such myths provide for social coordination, and in that sense they emerge in cooperation with material conditions, and as material conditions change so too should the myths. Historical moments which call for major shifts in myths may be understood as revolutionary periods, and during these periods, when the old myth is "in the process of losing its vitality as a device for polarizing social cooperation" there are likely to be "many rival symbols competing to take its place" (88).

Burke reminds his audience that they are meeting during a revolutionary period, and he rehearses the symbols of various ideologies competing to supplant the "decayed" symbol of "bourgeois nationalism." Soon he focuses on the question of strategy <u>for</u> Communism; that is, by what technique can the Communists best succeed in replacing the old symbol with the Communists' "symbol of class"? The specific communist symbol was that of "the worker," and Burke proposes to analyze that symbol to discover "to what extent it fulfills the conditions of attachment." He speaks, he says, "**purely from the standpoint of propaganda**" (88). Thus, "the worker" should be examined for its capacity to "spread the word," to gather new allies in the cause of Communism.

In his evaluation of the symbol "the worker," Burke maintains that in order to be an effective recruiting device for the unconvinced, a symbol must appeal to people's ambitions, not sympathies: it must embody an ideal image with which people can identify. Thus, argues Burke, while there undoubtedly are a "few people who really want to work, let us say, as a human cog in an automobile factory," our ideal image lies in other directions. The workers' "rigorous ways of life," says Burke, "enlist our **sympathies**, but not our **ambitions**. Our ideal is as far as possible to **eliminate** such kinds of work, or to reduce its strenuousness to a minimum." In addition, the American population has been "so conditioned by the reactionary forces in control of our main educational channels" that the ideal American image is the one peddled by "our economic mercenaries (our advertising men and sales organizations)" which envisions the riches of material "commodities consumed under expensive conditions." The central point is that the middle-class lifestyle and values, not those of the downtrodden but noble worker, seemed to Burke to be the focal point of the <u>ambitions</u> of the average American. The propaganda question which must be analyzed, given the above, is: "Is the symbol of the worker

accurately attuned to us?" Is the symbol of "the worker" adapted well to conditions and values in America? Burke "tentatively suggests" that it is not (89).

Burke advances his argument by way of comparision between "the worker" -- or potentially "the masses" -- as a symbol for Communist recruiting in America and "the people" as an alternative symbol. Burke argues that "the people" is, for propagandistic purposes, far superior for a couple of reasons.

First, "the people" is "closer to our folkways" than either "the worker" or "the masses," "both in spontaneous popular usage and as stimulated by our political demagogues." It participates in cultural ambitions -- and "one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values -- just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making local deities into saints" (89-90). In this respect, "the people" is explicitly superior propaganda. "We convince a man," Burke says, "by reason of the values which we and he hold **in common**. Propaganda (the extension of one's recruiting into ever widening areas) is possible only insofar as the propagandizer and the propagandized have **kindred** values, share the **same** base of reference" (91).

Second, "the people," "as distinct from the proletarian symbol, also has the tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of unity." That is, it "contains the ideal, the ultimate classless feature which the revolution would bring about" (90). "The people" in that sense enacts the utopic vision of egalitarian unity whereas "the worker" enacts the allegiances of the revolutionary antagonisms (as a class rising up against an opposition class), but it does not offer a vision of the aftermath, the utopia, which aligns in any meaningful way with the ambitions of the American population. In this way, "the people" is a "positive" symbol while "the worker" is a negative one because it preserves "too strict adherence of the doctrine of 'antithetical moralities' ('proletarian' as antithetical to 'bourgeois')" (91). "The strictly proletarian symbol," notes Burke, "has the useful advantage of emphasizing the temporary antagonism -- but it has the disadvantage of not sufficiently embodying within its connotations the **ideal** incentive, the eventual state of unification that is expected to flow from it" (92). Thus, because "the people" is a more inclusive symbol (93) which emobodies the positive ideal of classless unification and because it better aligns with the folkways and language patterns of Americans, it is likely to be a more effective tool for propaganda. Recognition of Burke's emphasis on effectiveness in the selection of a symbol is important because it reflects a pragmatic rather than ideologically pure orientation toward the question of revolution.

Burke also turns to the question of the writer's role -- and effectiveness -- in advancing the revolutionary cause within

a general propaganda strategy emphasizing "the people" rather than "the worker." While "much explicit propaganda must be done," it is "mainly the work of the pamphleteer and political organizer." The "writer's best contribution to the revolutionary cause is implicit":

> For he thus indirectly links his cause with the kinds of intellectual and emotional engrossment that are generally admired. He speaks in behalf of his cause, not in the ways of a lawyer's brief, but by the sorts of things he associates with it. In a rudimentary way, this is what our advertisers do when they recommend a particular brand of cigarette by picturing it as being smoked under desireable conditions. . . . Reduced to a precept, the formula would run: Let one encompass as many desireable features of our cultural heritage as possible -- and let him make sure that his political alignment figures prominently among them (91).

Through such alignment of political ideals and existent cultural values, the propagandizer is able to create a "pre-political" orientation, to create the perceptual orientation that can grow into political commitment. As regards the symbol "the people," it can be associated with cultural values and be aligned politically in such a manner as to engender this pre-political orientation. As a symbol, it is inclusive rather than antagonistic (like "the worker" has been seen to be), and thus it can insinuate itself into even potentially hostile minds. Burke writes,

> Particularly as regards the specific problems of propaganda, the emphasis upon the **antithetical** tends to incapacitate a writer for his task as a **spreader** of doctrine by leading him too soon into antagonistic modes of thought and expression. It gives him too much authority to **condemn** -- and however human this desire to grow wrathful may be, and however justified it is by the conditions all about us, the fact remains that his specific job as propagandist requires him primarily to wheedle and cajole, to practice the arts of ingratiation (92).

The pragmatic art of ingratiation, not the ideologically pure act of condemnation, is the more <u>effective</u> propaganda, and to the extent that the propagandizer wants to maximize his/her effectiveness -- that is, "wheedle and cajole" the unconvinced -- it is better "to use **their** vocabulary, **their** values, **their** symbols, insofar as this is possible" (92). Specifically, as a propagandizer the imaginative writer should employ a symbol such as "the people" because it can work implicitly, through the processes of association, to attract new converts: it offers a pre-political orientation which -- by pamphleteers and organizers -- can later be crystallized into explicit ideology. The

movement from an artistically-inspired pre-political orientation to explicit political identification represents a "fulfillment of the form" of the symbol "the people."

Burke concludes his address on a bit of a conciliatory note, suggesting that even if the his pro-Communist audience rejects his symbol of "the people" -- "and I see many just grounds for their doing so," he notes during the speech (93) -- he hopes they will take to heart the broader message that "the imaginative writer seek to propagandize his cause by surrounding it with as full a cultural texture as he can manage" (93). To recognize with greater clarity how such associative propaganda functions to establish the pre-political orientation that can blossom into full-fledged political commitment requires a re-examination of Burke's concept of "form" in relation to the functions of "rhetoric."

Revolutions of Symbolism: From Aesthetics to Propaganda

From at least the time of "Psychology and Form" (1925), Burke focused much of his theorizing in and around the concept of "form." The concern, of course, was with the creation and satisfying of an appetite through symbolic inducements. Burke's own literary interests plus his association with Scofield Thayer's Dial combined in the eyes of critics like Granville Hicks to render their interpretation of Burke's concept of "form" as concerned with aesthetics only, as concerned purely with technique rather than effect and therefore, politically conservative because the maximum artistic arousal of expectations and emotions can occur only within the range of experiences and values which are commonly shared: it is only in the non-controversial, transcendent realm of "universal" values that an artist can give "full sway to his eloquence" (Hicks, 1931, 20-1), for it is only in such a non-contextualized realm of values that art can endure in the face of historical -- and political -- change. Although the criticism by Hicks and others probably over-stated Burke's aestheticism, the general thrust of their arguments had merit: Burke clearly leaned in the direction of aestheticism.

By the time "Psychology and Form" was reprinted in Counter-Statement (1931), however, Burke had already begun to readjust his posture. He became politically involved -- like many other "middle-class writers" in the 1920s, Burke had "paid scant attention to revolutionary causes," but was "drawn to the Left" after the stock-market crash and the onset of the Depression (Aaron, 288). In relatively abstract defenses of his concept of "form" ("Counter-Blasts on Counter-Statement"), as well as in more overtly political essays ("Boring from Within," "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism," and "My Approach to Communism"), proposals for political magazines (the New State), and political satire ("Waste -- the Future of Prosperity") Burke clearly had begun to move beyond the narrow constrictions of pure aesthetics. Brief exposition of two of these essays might help to chart the shifts that were occurring.

In "Boring from Within" (1931), Burke develops the argument that a dominant and prosperous system cannot be attacked successfully from a critical position -- and terminology -- exterior to it. But with the exposure of capitalism in the crash of 1929, "one can attack capitalism by the ideals of capitalism itself" (326). Burke views this conclusion both theoretically and programmatically, and he extracts from his observations a persuasive strategy for social and cultural transformation, for a "transvaluation" of our jumble of only-seemingly hegemonic values. He finds a sort of hortatorical joy in the depression of material conditions: "This is a grim time for rejoicing -- but it is good to know that an absurdity will finally become an absurdity, even by its own code of values. And when it does, we must scrupulously make certain that those business men who in recent years had become business brains are consistently and effectively taunted for their difficulties. It is our pious duty to make them squirm -- not through vindictiveness, but by way of impairing their dangerous authority in the future" (326). He thus clearly endorses a sense of political purpose in artistic production, and he accepts the revolutionary vision of Communism. He objects, however, to the persuasive strategies invoked.

To make his point, Burke moves into an analysis of Edmund Wilson's "Appeal to Progressives" (New Republic) in which he urged American radicals to "take Communism away from the Communists, and take it without ambiguities or reservations, asserting that their ultimate goal is the ownership of the means of production by the government." About this objective, Burke seems to have few quibbles: he is in fundamental agreement with the vision, with the political platform. His objection is with the propagandistic method, the rhetorical technique employed to achieve the desired effect, the persuasion. Consistent with his theorizing from the twenties, Burke's emphasis is on technique, but now it is technique clearly directed toward the obtaining of specific political persuasion. That is, it is not only an aesthetic question of which technique is beautiful or most stirring but rather a political question of what technique would best work under given ephemeral human circumstances to achieve certain desired persuasive ends. The two questions point toward what I am calling a distinction between **technique** and **strategy**, with the notion in mind that it is this distinction which moves us toward the concept of **rhetoric as persuasion**. Otherwise put, the propagandist must understand thoroughly the rhetorical techniques available to him, and then select wisely and circumspectly those techniques which would be most functional toward his objectives. This is, of course, strategy. It is through the strategic employment of available rhetorical techniques that the propagandizer is able to produce the desired persuasion. This approach to rhetoric clearly harkens back to the classical tradition as exemplified by Aristotle: rhetoric is the search for the available means of persuasion in a specified circumstance.

These themes are extended in "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism" (1933). In this essay, Burke even more clearly gives artistic production a political agenda. He writes, "The present article proposes to say something further on the subject of art and propaganda. It will attempt to set forth a line of reasoning as to why the contemporary emphasis must be placed largely upon propaganda, rather than 'pure' art" (675). He proceeds to advance seven propositions in support of this central contention, including -- as proposition six -- the argument that "'pure' art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound." Until such an ideal time, art must maintain a corrective function:

> Since pure art makes for acceptance, it tends to become a social menace in so far as it assists us in tolerating the intolerable. . . . For this reason it seems that under conditions of competitive capitalism there must necessarily be a large **corrective** or **propaganda** element in art. Art cannot safely confine itself to **using** the values which arise out of a given social texture and integrating their conflicts, as the soundest, "purest" art will do. It must have a definite hortatory function, an element of suasion and/or inducement of the education variety; it must always be partially forensic. Such a quality we consider to be the essential work of propaganda (677).

The corrective or forensic nature of art is a new emphasis in Burke, especially if compared with his earlier preference for consideration of technique to the virtual exclusion of effect or consequence. But, as Cowley said of Burke's interests in the years immediately preceeding the Writers Congress, "Lately his literary interest had turned from construction to persuasion, from pure form to rhetoric" (1980, 276). And it was a rhetoric explicitly concerned with effects, effects which could best be attained through skillful use of artistic form for propagandistic purposes.

In "Revolutionary Symbolism," Burke casts the writer explicitly in the role of a propagandizer. That is, the writer must work toward the attainment of socially desireable ends, and the means by which to do that is through the manipulation of form. "Insofar as a writer really is a propagandist," declares Burke, s/he is "not merely writing work that will be applauded by his allies, convincing the already convinced, but actually moving forward like a pioneer into outlying areas of the public and bringing them the first favorable impressions of his doctrine" (88-9). The process -- the technique -- by which this occurs is that of form.

In making his evaluation of the symbol of "the worker," Burke invokes a formalistic interpretation of symbolic action itself; that is, as Burke writes, every symbol "must embody an **ideal**" of what one would become. The symbol arouses an

expectation of what could be; it whets the appetite of desire for an envisioned future condition, and the political program itself leads to the adequate satisfying of the appetite. Moreover, in arousing such an appetite, the propagandist must draw on the potpourri of shared values, traditions, attitudes, etc., for, as Granville Hicks had correctly argued four years earlier, the greatest eloquence -- that is, the most successful arousal of appetite -- occurs from within the commonplace and, consistently, the universal. Hicks, of course, saw that as necessarily conservative of tradition, but in "Revolutionary Symbolism" Burke is explicitly suggesting that traditional values may, through the manipulation of cultural commonplaces and "universal 'truths'" and the expectations which can be excited from them, be "transvalued" into new and revolutionary allegiances.

In "Revolutionary Symbolism," Burke's arguments in favor of the symbol of "the people" are based in part upon its participation in more "universal" than historically transient values and conditions. It is this linkage which connects the revolutionary moment with not only the material and ideological circumstances of the times -- for each phase of history does indeed carry its own "burdens" -- but also the cultural past and the utopic future: In its propagandistic function, "form" functions through the prods of traditional values and symbols and the goads of anticipated fulfillment in an ideal future culture. It is important to recognize that contrary to Hicks' assertion of four years earlier that Burke's concept of "form" was purely aesthetic (an accusation with which Burke quibbled, but to which he admitted in general) and necessarily conservative (an accusation which Burke dismissed as not pertinent to a discussion of artistic eloquence per se), Burke is now arguing explicitly that artistic form functions in a pre-political manner to inspire cultural change -- and necessarily in an anti-capitalist direction -- and further that such cultural change can best be effected through the "eloquence" of broad, culturally-engrained "universal" values, not through the transient symbols of historical circumstance and antagonisms. Burke writes, "In the last analysis, art strains towards **universalization.** It tends to overleap imaginatively the class divisions of the moment and go after modes of thought that would apply to a society freed of class divisions. It seeks to consider the problems of **man**, not of **classes of men.**"

Such universalization is pre-political in that the classless ideal -- the egalitarian "people" -- can function as a goad, a form, toward its own enactment; moreover, it can also possess a sense of attraction through detachment in that it identifies or defines an "opposite" which serves as a "negative goad."[7] That is, Burke sees "the people," with its formal implications of classless and comfortable unification as embodying the ideal of Communism, as being an implicitly Communist aesthetic, and thus as necessarily anti-fascist. Burke writes, "a totally universalized art, if established in

America to-day, would simply be the spiritual denial of an underlying economic disunity (the aesthetic of fascism)" (92). In this sense, "the people" represents a pro-communist aesthetic; through its formal goads it transforms traditional middle-class values and the symbols of American folkways into the stuff from which pampleteers and organizers can brew revolutionary action.

The propaganda strategy urged by "Revolutionary Symbolism" is one of a transvaluation through manipulations of form: form becomes an agency of political change, not a conservator of inherited mal-adapted tradition. The valuation of form itself is no longer so much on technique; rather, purpose -- but not, in the proletarian tradition, subject-matter -- comes to the fore, and with the elevation of the role of purpose comes, part and parcel, a concern with effect. The speech "Revolutionary Symbolism" not only details specific propaganda strategies for radical writers and, ultimately, the Communist Party but it also symbolizes a revolution in Burke's own theory of symbolic form: "Revolutionary Symbolism" captures for critical display the transformation in Burke's theorizing of the concept of "rhetoric" as it turns from a concern primarily with technique to a concern primarily with persuasion.

"Revolutionary Symbolism" as Persuasion

When he delivered his speech at the New School for Social Research, Burke faced an audience of two-to-four hundred writers, critics, and members of the press, most of whom were sympathetic with revolutionary causes and a good many of whom were affiliated with the Communist Party in one way or another,[8] and he faced it nervously. Ironically, the cause for Burke's anxiety was not the content of the speech (after all, he had had that checked by a person he presumed to be a Party member and had received a positive response) but rather by the fact that at that time Burke was a virtual novice public speaker. Cowley writes, "He was an innocent at the time, unused to speaking before an audience, especially one with strong political convictions" (1980, 277). It was with some trepidation, then, that Burke began. As he recounts events,

> . . . after I had been reading for a while, and was nearly finished, the Chairman. . . announced that my time was up. I still had about two pages to go. Holding up the two unread pages, I asked for a bit more time. The audience applauded -- which was taken to mean that I should be allowed to finish, although it could have been interpreted less favorably. In any case I was allowed to read the two pages ("Thirty Years Later," 506)

When Burke finished speaking, he was greeted with "a nice hand." "Since I was greatly afraid of audiences," he later commented, "I sat down feeling wonderful." "I wanted to bask in my own self-satisfaction" ("Thirty Years Later," 506).

But then the question and discussion period began, and Burke was lambasted on all sides. It may be significant to note that the vigorous objections came from some of the most committed of the Communists present. It is also significant to note that, because the official line of the Commintern changed from that of the Third Period to that of the Popular Front in the interim between when the Writers Congress was held and when the proceedings were published, the "official" transcript "simply omitted" some of what Burke calls "the strongest details of the slaughter" ("Thirty Years Later," 507).

That "official" record, doctored as it was, still records vivid objections to Burke's suggestions. The protests ranged from Michael Gold's objection to class distinctions being regarded as "myths" rather than "realities," through Allen Porter's objection to Burke supposedly placing the symbols of "the worker" and "the people" in opposition to each other, to Friedrich Wolf's more significant -- and strident -- objection that "the people" was the symbol of fascism itself: "Hitler knew enough to use this ideological device as a supplement to his blackjacks and machine guns. Utilization of the myth of '<u>das Volk</u>,' the people, is an essential part of the reformist approach. In my own country it has directly resulted in the fascists taking power" (as reprinted in Simons and Melia, 274-6).

The unofficial, unpurged record of participant memories suggests an even more hostile response. Much of the reaction was centered not only on the symbol if "the people" <u>per se</u> but also on Burke's status as a spokesperson, as an admitted member of not the proletariat but rather the petit bourgeois. It was the more functionary members of his target audience -- that is, most empowered to better effect changes in Party strategy -- who objected most vociferously. Cowley interprets this as a manifestation of a need on the part of the detracters "to affirm" their own "position as a loyal Communist," that is, as followers of the narrowly ideological Third Period of International Communism (1980, 278). Whatever the psychological cause, the effect was vitrol. In "Thirty Years Later," Burke recalls some of the reactions:

> As regards the question of the workers, the proletariat, I had admitted that I was a petit bourgeois, and could speak only as a petit bourgeois. Joe Freeman gets up, throbbing like a locomotive, and shouts, "We have a snob among us!" I was a snob, in conceding that I was a petit bourgeois and would have to speak like one. Then Mike Gold followed, and put a steamroller on me. . . . And so on, and so on -- until I was slain, slaughtered. . . . I felt wretched. I remember, when leaving the hall, I was walking behind two girls. One said to the other, as though they were discussing a criminal, "Yet he **seemed** so honest!" (506).

In understanding the reaction that Burke received from his immediate audience, it is significant to recognize the relational pattern which his discourse establishes between himself and his audience. Burke aligns himself with the Communist cause, and he adopts the role of a spokesperson not so much <u>for</u> as <u>to</u> the Communist Party. That is, Burke is, in a sense, in Communism, but Communism is not in him. He is advising the Communists on what they ought to do in order to succeed: he is an "advertising" agent who has the "campaign" to "sell" the "product" of Communism, and his target audience would thus be those best able to give him "the contract," to accept his campaign. But not only is he himself not a member of the Party, his advice would contravene and dissolve the very symbols of allegiance which true Party members had already established (and through which they themselves were established as Party members). As an agent for Communism, Burke was representative not for those who were Communists but rather for those who were not: the "petty bourgeoisie." And he even enacted, in a sense, the role of the "ad-man," perhaps the very symbol of capitalism's deception of "the worker." But it was in the voice of an agent that he spoke. This discrepancy between his persona as agent, his message of transvaluation of the traditional values of the "petty bourgeoisie," and his "target audience" of Communist functionaries may go a long way toward explaining both the response of the audience and, ultimately, Burke's rather traumatic response to the audience's response. Or, in somewhat different terms, it harkens back to an accusation that Burke, as theorist, critic, writer, or propagandist, did not write for workers to read: he was of the petty bourgeoisie, and he wrote for intellectuals. Burke later commented, "That's precisely what they got after me for" following his speech: "I said I couldn't write for the working class. That was the irony of the case" ("Thirty Years Later," 501).

In an evaluation of Burke's speech based on an examination of immediate effects on the specific, target audience, "Revolutionary Symbolism" would have to be judged as a complete failure. As a blueprint for propaganda, it failed to follow it own best advice: it did not speak in the language of its audience. Although within a matter of months the Comintern would officially announce the "Popular Front," or, as it is sometimes translated, the "People's Front," there is absolutely no reason to believe that Burke's arguments had anything to do with that move. Rather, Burke had anticipated a necessary change in strategy, but had done so before an audience that at that time was seeking its self-affirmation in the policies of the past. The result was that Burke was a "traitor," someone to be castigated.

22

"Revolutionary Symbolism" as Failed Identification: Burke's Desolation

Just as Burke's political writings and speculations about propaganda accelerated throughout the early portions of the 1930s and, in many respects, reached their culmination in the speech "Revolutionary Symbolism," so too may we see the maturation of one of Burke's many "selphes" through the same period. The crises of the early thirties -- both personal and public -- in a sense dissolved the "Burke of the Dial" and created an "activist Burke" who not only wrote politically inspired reviews and essays, and who proposed the creation of a new leftest political magazine, the New State (1933), but who translated his new orientation into ritualistic transformations of self, reidentifications of personality. The "activist Burke" may well have dissolved in substantial ways during the vitriolic discussion following Burke's speech, leading toward the constitution of yet another "Burke" (It is tempting to refer to this as the "life, death, re-Burke cycle).

Burke's newly-invigorated politicism in the years prior to the Writers Congress prompted his involvement in protest actions. Josephson recalls that in June, 1934, Burke joined with a number of other writers -- Dashiell Hammett, Albert Halper, Michael Gold, Malcolm Cowley, and others -- in picketing the Macaulay Publishing Company in protest of the company's firing of a bookkeeper for pro-union activities. Josephson describes the event as "a joyful occasion to come together outdoors and give expression to our public spirit and our fellow-feeling for the Macaulay clerks. The laughter, slogan-shouting, and singing made it one of the merriest parties I had ever attended" (1967, 356). The strikers were soon arrested and taken to jail. According to Josephson, Burke, "finding himself incarcerated for the first and only time in his life, behaved as a Chevalier Bayard, sans peur et sans reproche" (357). Thus, "without fear and without shame," Burke stood before the eyes of capitalist law fortified by the self-same sense of pure virtue which had permitted Bayard, the good knight, to defend a bridge over the Garigliano single-handedly against over two-hundred Spanish troops. He was infused with the might and dignity of being right; self-doubts were absorbed into the certitudes of collective political action.

Although Burke's participation in the collective rituals of picketing and marching was without doubt more the exception than the rule, the MacCaulay protest is not a purely isolated instance. In the "Thirty Years Later" symposium on the Writers Congress, William Phillips, an editor of the Partisan Review, recalls another episode:

> I remember one incident, Kenneth Burke, when you and I, and a lot of other people, were marching in a May Day parade. . . . I remember your joining in the

> shout, "We write for the working class." And I remember wondering whether Kenneth Burke really thought he wrote for the working class. How many workers read Kenneth Burke? (501).

The precariousness of Burke's position is highlighted by a comment offered by Jerre Mangione, "In the thirties a mutual friend estimated that the number of Americans who could fully understand Burke's writings numbered less than a thousand" (265). At the time, however, that was not particularly significant from Burke's point of view: what was important was that in such ritual enactments came a sense of unity, a sense of belonging, of losing oneself in the collective cause. It transformed protest into a "joyful occasion."

Cowley's intepretation of Burke's reaction to his reception at the Writers Congress follows this line of thinking. Cowley argues that Burke was, essentially, in despair, and the prospects of unification in the god-head of a cause appeared as a psychological balm to Burke. Cowley writes of Burke in the early 1930s,

> He had . . . emerged from the personal crisis of divorce from his first wife and marriage to her younger sister. He now worried about the effect of the divorce on his three daughters. He worried about the state of the country. He worried about his family's sinking into destitution. He had written a novel, Towards A Better Life (1932), in which the hero declines into catatonic dementia, and that was another worry: mightn't he end as his hero did? Could he avoid that fate by joining with others to build a better world? (276).

Cowley uses this to offer a psychological explanation of Burke's involvement with Communist activism and his subsequent strong reaction to sharp criticisms of his speech at the 1935 Writers Congress. That is, he saw Burke's paper as an outgrowth of Burke's desire to "join with others," to create a web of social identifications by which to protect his own identity from the dissolutions which dissipated "John Neal." Cowley writes, "Those papers at the writer's congress often had a substratum of unexpressed emotions, and Kenneth's paper was no exception." Among the political motivations of those papers lay also "the personal specter of isolation and nervous breakdown" (1980, 276).

Although, on the face of it, Burke's commitment to communism may seem insubstantial -- a reviewer for New Masses referred to Burke's attitude toward communism as "that of a dog gingerly flirting with a porcupine" (as quoted in Aaron, 290) -- those readings focus on Burke's demurrings from orthodox, Third Period ideology. They fail to recognize the psychological importance to Burke that unification, or identification, with

communist objectives offered. Cowley's reading of Burke's desire to constitute himself through a web of social identifications may be the more salient measure of his Communist commitment. In the "Thirty Years Later" symposium, Burke seems to offer credence to his friend's analysis, acknowledging that it was "a time when I was fighting on many fronts, some purely personal" and that, as a result, "I had a terrific desire to belong; as they put it later in the mass media, you know, 'togetherness'" (506):

> As for attachment to the party, in a way, in an ambiguous way, I was attached to it. Emerging from a sense of complete isolation into a sense of participation in a movement, that was tremendous. So when I took a beating at the Congress, I felt hopelessly rejected. That's what the whole thing meant to me (504).

The unfavorable, and personal, response to Burke's paper tore asunder any personal sense of absorption into a higher unification. "Kenneth felt wretched," recalls Cowley, "his dream of fellowship was slaughtered" (1980, 278).

The result was an intense psychological response to the events of the Congress. According to reports, he remained polite throughout the period of discussion of his paper; Josephson, for instance, recalls, "Poor Burke was overborne by so much censure, but he held his ground, smiling, and allowed that he had expected there would be an unfavorable reaction" (1967, 371). (In the "official" transcript, Burke merely comments that he was "not disappointed in the response I expected when bringing up the subject." It is unclear what that has to say about the actual response received; it is clear, however, that he wished "some one had discussed the issue from my point of attack, the problem of propaganda") (as reprinted in Simons and Melia, 279). Despite Burke's seeming receptivity to the criticisms of both his paper and himself, he without question felts the pangs of rejection and the loss of a dream of unity. In the "Thirty Years Later" symposium, he recalls his dreams from the night after he gave his speech:

> I was tired out. I went home and tried to get some sleep. . . . I lay down and began to doze off. But of a sudden, just as I was about to fall asleep, I'd hear "Burke!" -- and I'd awake with a start. Then I'd doze off again, and suddenly again: "Burke!" My name had become a kind of charge against me -- a dirty word. After this jolt had happened several times, another symptom took over. Of a sudden I experienced a fantasy, a feeling that excrement was dripping from my tongue. Some years before, in an early story, I had used this image in connection with an imaginary character -- and now it was happening to me almost literally. I felt absolutely lost (506-7).

While the vividness of the imagery may grab our attention in the above passage, it is perhaps as significant that Burke's very name had turned against him: he was a word-man whose personal word, whose name, was no longer aligned with his identity.

The connection between names, identity, and "togetherness" was further intensified for Burke the next day, Sunday April 28th, as he attended subsequent sessions of the Congress. He attended one session, "chaired by the friend to whom I had originally shown my paper before I read it at the general meeting." The session went like this:

> When someone indicated that he wanted to speak, my friend would acknowledge him, "Comrade So-and-So." Then someone else -- and again he was recognized by the Chair as "Comrade." Then I put up my hand, rather timidly, to indicate that I had something to say. My friend said: "Com -- er -- Mr. Burke." No tovarich, just gospodin Burke (507).

Burke's dreams of unification, of togetherness, were shattered. He had, in a sense, lived Sherwood Anderson's quip about Theodore Dreiser: He couldn't be a Communist if he wanted to. They wouldn't have him.

Burke's split with the Communist Party was very much like his alignment with it: the substantive factors were psychological and not readily available for inspection. Thus, while Burke probably more closely identified himself with the Communist ideal than they realized, once his identification was torn asunder, he was probably less closely identified with them than they realized. That is, while the criticisms of his paper meant a tremendous amount to Burke, they seemingly held little other than momentary significance for the critics. In Cowley's reading, they used the opportunity to demonstrate their allegiance to the ideological guillotine of the Third Period, and, once Burke's heresies had been properly excoriated, he himself was again acceptable. Thus, recalls Burke,

> The next day, as I walked down the hall, I saw Joe Freeman coming. And I started to cringe away. I felt embarrassed at such a meeting. But Joe came up and smiled and shook hands with me, and said, "Well, I'm sorry, old man." It was all over! And when the list of members for the Council of the League of American Writers was proposed for adoption by the Congress (and of course adopted) my name was among them (508).

Burke was forgiven, and he was given a role of the Executive Committee of the League of American Writers. He would write a favorable review of the Congress for The Nation (1935), a review in which he praised the Communist Party for being the only "organization in the country" which "could have assembled and carried through a congress of this sort." But he also took

pains to make clear that he was "one who is not a member of the Communist Party, and indeed whose theories of propaganda, expressed at one session, even called down upon him the wrath of the party's most demonic orators" (571). Similarly, he would help plan and would present a paper at the 1937 Writers Congress, and he would stay active in leftist intellectual discussions. But his "activist Burke" identity was dead, for the dream of unification, of loss of self in the larger glory of cause, was shattered. His trust, and hence his identification, were gone.

In the "Thirty Years Later" symposium, Burke conveys his distrust and his newly charged skepticism through a story about two frogs:

> Some friends of mine had an aquarium, with a frog in it. He was a big frog, but there was a cover on it so he couldn't get out. Then somebody gave them a little frog, and they put the little frog in the same aquarium. And the two frogs would sit there side-by-side. One day my friends looked in -- and by God they couldn't find the little frog. The top was on, but where was the little frog? They looked all around, no little frog. All of a sudden they spotted him. There were his feet sticking out of the big frog's mouth. So they pulled him out; and since he hadn't started to get digested yet, he was all right. All they could do with him was put him down in the aquarium again. And they did. The next time they looked in, these two fellows were sitting side-by-side. All was forgiven. I often think of that story when I think about politicians (508).

With fear and with shame -- for there is shame, and guilt, in breaking the covenants of unification -- Burke stood before the eyes of Communist judgment at the Writers Congress. Although he was forgiven, he had, like the little frog, seen the belly of the beast, and he would henceforth keep his distance, at least psychologically.

Conclusion:
Toward the "People's Front"

The aftermath of Burke's presentation to the 1935 Writers Congress is an historical oddity. Burke, whom Cowley saw as "pointing toward the future" while "most of the Congress was pointing toward the past" ("Thirty Years Later," 506), felt scorned by the Communist loyalists and, although he fulfilled obligations for the League of American Writers and delivered another paper at the 1937 Writers Congress, began to dissociate himself from the Communist cause. At the same time, the Communist Party itself moved very much toward the position and propaganda which Burke was advocating: On August 2, 1935, the Comintern announced the shift from the razor-edged Third Period to the more conciliatory and coalition-minded Front Populaire, which Cowley, no doubt to some extent influenced by Burke's earlier arguments, has insisted should be translated as the "People's Front" (Cowley, 1980, 269). In announcing the People's Front, Comrade Dimitrov "laid a good deal of stress on the question of words, saying that 'we want to find a common language with the broad masses.'" As Cowley notes, "at this point Kenneth Burke would have applauded him" (1980, 287). But in many respects it was too late for Burke; his flirtation with Communism had effectively ended with the rebuke at the 1935 Writers Congress. Burke, blistered and transformed in April of 1935, was no longer trusting, no longer to risk self in unification with others in political causes. From now own, Burke would remain on the political sidelines, occasionally "sending a play in," but always allowing someone else to "carry the ball."

Ironically, the People's Front, and allied organizations such as the League of American Writers, were very effective in insinuating themselves into the American mainstream. Membership in the League, for instance, jumped from 220 to 610 by 1938 and 750 by the end of that year. The Call for the Third Writers Congress in 1939 was signed by 72 writers. "So respectable had the League of American Writers become that when Van Wyck Brooks offered President Roosevelt honorary membership . . . , Roosevelt responded with 'hearty appreciation' in accepting the invitation" (Klehr, 356). The strategy clearly had the potential for being effective, for re-aligning cultural values in a pre-political preparedness for change. The strategy, however, may have been adopted too late to have much impact; in any event, whatever inroads it made, or may have made, were nullified with the Moscow trials and the news of the Stalinist purges.

The 1935 Writers Congress was convened on the cusp between the Third Period and the People's Front. Most of the writer-delgates sat, Janus-faced, between the two periods, but Kenneth Burke, for one, kept his eyes clearly on the future, willing to appropriate the symbols of the past in the literal

formation of a better future, but unwilling to dwell in the past itself. In this essay, I have tried to suggest some of the historical forces which influenced Burke and some of Burke's responses to those forces. Specifically, I have tried to offer an interpretation of "Revolutionary Symbolism" which emphasizes its propaganda strategy as an extension of Burke's concept of "form," an extension which shifts Burke's concern with "rhetoric" from a focus on technique *per se* to a more Aristotelian focus on rhetoric as a means of persuasion, as a means of achieving a desired and purposeful effect on an audience. I have tried to indicate that Burke's propaganda strategy may have been "good rhetoric" in the sense that it may have been fairly successful (as the "People's Front" experience suggests), but that his speech itself failed as a rhetorical appeal to his specific audience. Finally, in discussing the psychological aspects of both Burke's commitment to and unification with Communism (albeit in his own terms) as well as his rejection by Communism, I hope to be pointing toward a further transformation in Burke's concept of rhetoric, one which sees the propaganda emphasis on persuasion as insufficient. I am speaking, of course, of Burke's subsequent encompassment of persuasion in his concept of identification and of identification's implication in our continual formations, dissolutions, and re-formations of identity. But that discussion will have to wait for another day.

Notes

[1]Klehr defines the periods a bit differently, extending the First Period to 1923. The Third Period was announced at the Comintern's Sixth World Congress in 1928. Each Period was conceived of as a response to historical phases in capitalism itself. Klehr writes, "The particular definition pf a 'period' was much more than an exercise in linguistics or Talmudic hair-splitting. The nature of capitalism in a given era was related to a particular inventory of Communist tactics" (11).

[2]Cowley suggests that writers in the John Reed Clubs "were the sort of artists, or hanger-on of the arts, who begin by adopting extreme principles to affirm their own identities." Had they come of age in 1920, "they would have been Dadaists; in 1927, they would have been Surrealists; in the late 1940s, Existentialists; in the 1950s, beats or Zen Buddhists or Action Painters." In the early 1930s "those who pictured themselves as forming an avante-garde were almost all proletarian writers (or painters or politicians)" (1980, 146).

[3]Accounts of the degree of Trachtenberg's influence differ. Josephson (1967, 365) suggests that Trachenberg's arguments simply hit a receptive audience: "to many liberals the new line seemed entirely reasonable, as it offered hope of arousing opinion in the western nations to the danger of war." Others suggest that more high pressure appeals and tactics may have been employed (Aaron, 281-82).

[4] Klehr notes that 18 of the 64 signers of the Call had endorsed the Communist presidential ticket for 1932 of Foster and Ford, that "at least another twenty-two were Party members or long-time sympathizers publicly identified with Party causes," that the preplanning committee "was largely Communist," and that "twelve of the sixteen members of the presiding committee were Party members" (473, 352).

[5]Granville Hicks, in retrospect, became "convinced that the party simply loaded the meeting. It told various units that they had to turn out for this particular meeting, that they had to sell tickets for it, and they did." In short, "it was certainly a party-packed meeting" ("Thirty Years Later," 496).

[6]While on the basis of the letters it is tempting to conclude that Johns was the friend to whom Burke refers, there is no confirmation of that. Cowley, for instance, in reference to the above quoted passage, writes, "As for the friend, Kenneth never told me his name" (1980, 277). Johns was Cowley's "relative by divorce," Cowley's first wife's first husband (225).

[7]The symbol functions to "congregate" by "segregating." The identification of an "enemy" facilitates the unification of the enemy's disparate opponents. This is, of course, a familiar Burkean theme. See, for instance, "Thiry Years After." My point is simply that the symbol "the people" may contain a positive ideal of classless comfort which embodies our ambitions and pulls us toward it as well as suggest an opponent, against whom a movement or culture may congregate and unify.

[8]Burke was clearly speaking under the assumption that he was speaking to Communist sympathizers. At one point in the speech he refers to his audience as a "pro-Communist audience" (88).

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